GIFT OF LOVE
I Corinthians 13:1-7, Matthew 2:7-11
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Something peculiar and disturbing happens on the way to becoming a parent. First time fathers are convinced that it is their problem alone, but I am assured that the same phenomenon happens to new mothers. In fact, it happens equally with people who are about to adopt a child. Sometime after the original shock of one's immanent parenthood wears off, but before the awesome event actually happens, the terrible realization sets in that there simply are no feelings of love toward this unborn child everybody is awaiting. Expectant fathers worry about that a lot, I hear. They contemplate what has happened, what is happening and what is about to happen and for the object of all this contemplation and commotion they feel absolutely nothing. Some take their deep, dark secret to minister or psychiatrist..."Dr...you're going to think I'm awful, some kind of cold-hearted barbarian.. but Dr., I don't love the baby my wife is about to have. In fact, I can't feel anything about him or her. What am I going to do?..."

And then the child is born: a pink, squinty, wrinkled, unresponsive, not terribly pretty infant, to all but immediate family, and for most parents the issue is resolved at the very sight, and for others it may take a few days, but for the vast, vast majority of people love is created by the child.

There are several miracles, it seems to me, which happen in the process of human regeneration. The miracle of conception; two microscopic cells joining to produce, ultimately, a person: the incredible process of gestation, and, the birth itself, the becoming of a human being. But of all the wonders in the event, nothing is more miraculous than the creation of love. Love is truly created, ex nihilo - out of nothing. Once there is nothing and then, a few short months later, there is a feeling so strong you would gladly die on its behalf.

A remarkable dynamic when you think about it - all that fierce affection and loyalty and dedication and intense feeling created out of nothing by an infant who doesn't make an inspiring speech, or sing a beautiful song, or even look very pretty, but simply shows up. That insight was brought into focus for me by Langdon Gilkey, University of Chicago scholar who writes learnedly about theology and science and philosophy, but who also knows about people. The paragraph, for some reason, jumped off the page..."To be enabled to love is the greatest gift that can be given to us, even more enhancing of the strengths of the self, of the depth of its joys, than being loved. Thus it is the parent who is really blessed by the presence of the child, not the reverse, because of the incredible gift of another being whom we can hardly help but love." (Message and Existence, p.203).

The dynamic is not confined to parent-child relationships, obviously. In fact, too much can be made of parenthood as a paradigm of God's love, and family as the only metaphor for divine/human encounter. The truth stands in all relationships. The most precious gift of all is a person who enables us to love; who calls love out of us. As first time parents discover, it is not a matter of will. Love cannot be willed. We can behave with justice and fairness and compassion toward others as an act of the highest moral intent. But we cannot will ourselves to feel love. That comes, always, as a gift, from somewhere outside ourselves, from another person whose very existence creates love in us and calls it out of us.

St. Paul understood that dynamic as the basis for the relationship between God and people. Paul could be tedious in his discussions of righteousness and the law, but no one ever accused him of being opaque about God and men and women in relationship. That, Paul

saw, is a miracle which depends on God, not anything in men and women. He chose the Greek word "Agape" to express it. "Eros" is romantic love; "Filia" is family and friendly affection: "Agape" is divine love, which has its source, not in the desirability or merit of the object, but in the basic posture of the subject. "Grace" he called it: the unmerited, undeserved, unearned love of God for people. It was not an abstraction for Paul. It took shape in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "That", Paul said, "is love."

In human relations this love becomes possible for those who allow it to be generated by and called out of them by Jesus Christ. In human relationships its essential character is defined by the fact that ordinary human virtues are meaningless gestures without it... "If I give away all I have...but have not love, I have nothing."

This love, Paul went on to argue, is the one permanent reality in the universe, the one thing we can count on always. Elsewhere he asked, "Who can separate us from the love of God?" And then listed all the catastrophes and disasters and threats to life, concluding that "nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ." (Romans 8).

On the subject of love, J.B.Phillips has translated beautifully, in a way that is part of the new Presbyterian Marriage Ceremony..."Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen."

That love is God's gift to us. It is eternal. Nothing shall ever overcome it. Nothing shall ever separate us from it. But it is not simply a theological concept, an abstraction. It is God giving himself to us. It is the gift of life, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, God incarnate. God's love is not, however, an end in itself. It is not even the greatest gift. That may sound strange on this Sunday - perhaps even heretical - but I am proposing that the greatest gift of all is the enablement, the calling of love out of you and me. The best thing of all is what happens when that love goes to work with the raw material of a human life.

We are constructed, apparently, with a need to love. We know, by now, about our need to be loved. We have learned that the love of parents and significant others is vital to the building of healthy personhood. Our need to love others is just as important. Psychologically, we have our identity in community, in a whole complex of relationships with other people. Our age has shown us how to celebrate our individuality. Our era has lifted up the self, the individual and given permission for the person, alone, whole. But the process sometimes goes beyond the point of helpfulness and healthiness. The human self has an alarming propensity to curve in upon itself, Martin Luther taught. "I gotta be me." "I did it my way": "Do your own thing." "If it feels good do it." Sometimes self-awareness looks suspiciously like selfishness, and self-realization like old fashioned self-indulgence.

No one of us can be a person alone. None of us is an island. It is perhaps the most subtle and fashionable of our original sins to think and act as if we are. We don't exist very long in a vacuum. We are human only in relationship. Dr. Lewis Thomas has a delightful little essay on "Cloning" in his best seller, The Medussa and the Snail, in which he pokes gentle fun at the science fiction fears generated by the laboratory ability to "clone" or recreate an individual from a single cell, a Thomas Jefferson, or Henry Kissinger, or Albert Schweitzer. Thomas points out that to clone the individual it would be necessary to duplicate the environment in which the individual matured...He writes,

"When you examine what we mean by 'environment' it comes down to other human beings. We use euphemisms and jargon for this like 'social forces', cultural influences,...but what is meant is the dense crowd of nearby people who talk to, listen to, smile or frown at, give to, withhold from, nudge, push, caress, or flail out at the individual." Thomas argues that to clone an individual you would also have to clone "parents, grandparents, family members, schoolmates, lovers, enemies, car pool partners..." The Dr. believes that we are not ready for an experiment of this size. (See On Cloning a Human Being, p. 41-45). The point he is making is a very important one.

We are human in relationship with other human beings. We are related. We need to love as badly as we need to be loved. Ebenezer Scrooge, Charles Dickens understood, could live human life - only when he allowed the people around him to open the window of his heart and call out the love he had been hoarding there for years.

We need others - wives, husbands, children, parents, friends, acquaintances, not simply for the love they give to us, but for our love which they create and call out of us. We need one another in order to live. Nothing is more clear than that. Yet, nothing is more elusive and evasive than open-ended creatively mutual love.

God's grace is given in freedom with the result that the gift is not always, not often, received. We don't have to accept it. The superb motion picture Ordinary People explores the dynamics of a suburban, well-to-do family that has forgotten how to love, if it ever knew how, and trying desperately to live on some other basis: social expectation, responsibility, propriety, control. An accidental death has created guilt and self-recrimination, attempted suicide, and the disintegration of the structures which hold the family together. It's an amazing movie: to see it is to be moved deeply by the beauty of the gift of love - which is always the calling of love out of us by someone who is willing to be vulnerable for us.

The focus of the problem in Ordinary People is a mother who cannot give anything of herself to her son. Love is always the gift of oneself. Sometimes we forget that. Sometimes we cave into the philosophy behind the TV commercials which, without apology or even discretion, equate love with the amount of money you are willing to borrow in order to purchase gifts. Sometimes we even reenforce that sad misunderstanding by literally taking our children by the hand, giving them our money, and forcing them to purchase gifts for others, ignoring those useless and clumsy little items which bear the investment of the person. I don't know what's in your treasure chest; there's nothing in mine that even resembles the gift suggestion list from a slick magazine, but you might find in there the picture of a gorilla someone drew for me for Christmas, or a photo of a toothless seven-year old framed with popsicle sticks.

Frederick Buechner, with his characteristic irreverence, speculated in print recently about the gifts of the Magi."It gives you pause," he wrote, "to consider how, for all their wisdom, they overlooked the one gift the child would have been genuinely pleased to have someday, and that was the gift of themselves and their love." (Peculiar Treasures, p.172).

A D Magazine contained the touching story of a young woman who was hurriedly delivering a glass of jelly to a shut-in on behalf of her church circle a few days before Christmas. She discovered a very lonely old woman who brightened immediately at the simple presence of another person. In fact, she prevailed on her harried caller to stay for coffee and a snack. When the old woman opened the cupboard door, the younger woman saw there, lined up, still with ribbons brightly wrapped, the untouched jelly jars from the past decade of well meaning but unloving deliveries. The old woman needed a little love - not jelly; a little humanity, not a holiday gesture. St. Paul observed: "If I give away all I have...and have not love, I gain nothing."

There is a lot going on emotionally at Christmas: affection, family reunions, genuine wishes of peace and good will, generosity. There is some sentimentality, a good dose of nostalgia, a little greed and a bit of silliness. There is also basic truth about the human condition. What God gives at Christmas, in the birth of Jesus Christ, is himself. It is not simply an infant to fawn over for a few weeks a year. What God gives is love - which means the very selfhood of God made vulnerable, offered to us in the human and humble process of birth.

There is no way to repay God for that. There really is no way to say "thank you" adequately. The only way to respond to love, is to love.

That is where we rest our case. Ultimately, the grace of God - the mysterious wonder of God's love for us is the source of our faith. We believe, finally, not because we have been convinced by logic, certainly not because we have been coerced: we believe, finally, because we sense that we are loved. Sometimes we find the courage to fight battles and take stands, because we sense we are loved. And sometimes we find strength to live another day, to face unknown futures, to walk confidently into the valley of the shadow of death because we have sensed that nothing will ever separate us from God's love. And sometimes, quietly, privately, we simply rejoice in the miracle of love that keeps happening deep within us - because in Jesus Christ we have been graced by God.

So let us keep the feast. "A child is born...a son is given...His name is Immanuel...God with us."

Amen.

God our Father, for all the customs and tradition, for carols and wreaths and family rituals, we give thanks. For memories of Christmases past, and dear ones who made the occasions of joy and laughter, we give thanks. But above all, our Father, we give thanks for love - Your love in Jesus Christ, and our love, created in us and called out of us by others. God eternal, we are grateful: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.